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SUBJECT: BELARUS ELECTION CONDITIONS: MUCH ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

REF: VILNIUS 719

¶1. (SBU) Although interest in Belarusian parliamentary elections later this month -- early voting begins September 23 -- is getting more intense every day, the GOB has still not taken any clear steps that would significantly improve conditions in comparison to previous elections. The regime failed to fix the flawed staffing of precinct election commissions, and in response to appeals has now added only eight more registered parliamentary candidates out of a possible 52 denied registration last week.

¶2. (SBU) OSCE/ODIHR Observation Mission Head Ambassador Geert-Hinrich Ahrens and his core staff briefed OSCE diplomats in Minsk September 5. Ahrens noted that the GOB has been "very helpful" in providing logistical assistance, but added that cooperation is still needed on specific aspects of the elections. He expressed his "overall impression" that the regime, by blocking about 20 percent of prospective parliamentary candidates, "missed an opportunity to make the [electoral] process more inclusive." Ahrens is still learning about the substance of the Belarusian opposition, but voiced justified frustration -- already shared with the media -- that the discussion of boycotting the elections was occupying more of political parties' time than campaigning. (Comment: We agree, and have told the local press as much ourselves. End comment.)

¶3. (SBU) Ahrens' staff provided further details. The OSCE/ODIHR mission is closely monitoring the media situation, paying especially close attention to candidates' access to radio, TV, and state newspapers. The mission is reviewing the complaint of some opposition candidates that local papers have refused to print their mandatory 4,000-word manifestos. The expert tracking the candidate registration process noted the pedantry of the process: one parliamentary hopeful was denied registration for not having declared ownership of a Zaporozhets (loosely stated, the Soviet equivalent of a Ford Pinto) he had actually sold 12 years ago.

¶4. (SBU) The greatest attention will be focused on the question of the transparency of voting, ballot box security, and the vote count. In the past, all have been critical areas where access has been limited or non-existent. As noted reftel, both the U.S. and EU have been stressing that clear progress is needed in this area, a sentiment Ahrens enthusiastically shares. (Note: Even if conditions are improved, however, the OSCE/ODIHR mission will not be able to observe much of the early voting September 23-27, as most of their short-term observers will not arrive in Belarus until the end of that period. End note.)

Comment

¶5. (SBU) If the GOB makes necessary improvements, it will find the OSCE/ODIHR mission and the international community very willing to welcome such steps. It is however troubling that -- as Ahrens has said -- some key opportunities have already been lost; for his part, he will stress that message next week to Central Election Commission chair Lidiya Yermoshina and is seeking a meeting with Presidential Administration head Vladimir Makey as well. If the regime now fails to deliver full transparency throughout the actual voting process,

we can expect reports to indicate that there has been no improvement in conditions since the previously monitored elections in 2004 or 2006.

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